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ABSTRACT

Contemporary studies of literacy can be divided into two sorts: those approaches which treat it as a psychological phenomenon and those which treat it as a social practice. This practice view of literacy can be sketched out by reporting the continuation and changing focus of a study conducted on adult learners' perceptions of literacy and learning. Subjects, 20 adults from Lancashire, England, between the ages of 20 and 30 years who had left school as early as possible and with minimal qualifications, underwent detailed interviews concerning the part literacy plays in their lives. Additional data consisted of ethnographic case studies of individual households, observation of neighborhood uses of literacy, and the collection of recorded data on access points for literacy. Preliminary findings suggest categories of significant topics necessary for a complete view of literacy: (1) literacy practices; (2) social practices; (3) roles people take; (4) networks of support; (5) the value of literacy; (6) literacy and change; and (7) how everyday processes of learning are revealed in the home. Examples from the data gathered illustrate the categories. How the social practice of literacy impinges on children is also illustrated with examples from the data. The practice view of literacy moves the focus from a static model of an individual with a set of skills to a more dynamic notion of social practices which people participate in. (RS)

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Developing a practice account of literacy from adult learners' perceptions of literacy and learning.

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1 Introduction

I take it as given that the many contemporary studies of literacy can be divided very roughly into two sorts: those approaches which treat it as a psychological phenomenon and those which treat it as more social in nature. As a psychological entity, literacy can be isolated and measured as a set of skills having influences, consequences or effects. The social approach views literacy as a complex phenomenon embedded in a social context, and where social meanings of literacy have precedence. The first view has been characterised by Street (1985) as an autonomous view of literacy and the latter as an ideological view of literacy, a distinction which has been taken up and developed by others. These two approaches can be viewed as two approaches to the same phenomena which should be united (as one recent overview, Cole and Nicolopoulou 1990, seems to imply) or they can be viewed as two paradigms which are incompatible with each other (as another recent overview, Street and Besnier 1991, seems to suggest). I will return to this later, at the end of the chapter.

Most studies of the relationship of literacy and thought fall into the first set of approaches, an autonomous view of literacy (for example); they have underlying them a view of two dimensions, *literacy* and *thought* and the studies are concerned with the relation between these two dimensions. The starting-point for a more social approach is the work of Scribner and Cole (1981), where at the end of a large-scale study they express dissatisfaction with treating literacy as a variable and suggest the possibility of developing a *practice* view of literacy.

In this paper I am working within this second approach and want to develop the idea of a practice view of literacy: examining what this means, reporting on an empirical study within this framework, and helping to provide new ways of talking about literacy[1].

2 Literacy in the community

The research I want to report is a part of a larger study being carried out at Lancaster University under the umbrella of the Literacy in the

Community project. One starting point for our research and for developing a practice account of literacy is the examination of the social basis of literacy. To do this we talk in terms of literacy *events* and literacy *practices*. Literacy events are the particular activities where literacy has a role; literacy practices are the general cultural ways of using literacy which people draw upon in any literacy event. These terms will become clearer with examples, later. Other researchers may prefer terms like *activity*, but these approaches are all part of recent attempts to link the social and the individual, which have shifted the focus of attention from individual's skills or behaviours to practices, events or activities which people participate in.

We start from social meanings, with the belief that technical and functional aspects follow from social meanings. In our research we also start from people's everyday uses of reading and writing, rather than from educational situations. To develop our view of literacy we are studying what ordinary people read and write in their everyday lives, how they make sense of literacy, and how it fits into the rest of their daily activities. We view this task of documenting and understanding everyday literacy as being an essential part of understanding how literacy is learned. In fact an important belief underlying our approach is that the key to learning is in everyday activities and how people make sense of them. We begin from everyday contexts, and later move on to education.

The methods we are using also involve a shift in emphasis; we are moving from reliance on quantitative approaches to incorporating (and developing) qualitative methods of analysis. We refer to this loosely as an ethnographic approach; it is not an abandoning of quantitative approaches, so much as an awareness of their limitations and of the need to complement standard approaches with detailed examination of what is happening in particular situations.

Two studies we have carried out earlier at Lancaster provide background to this study. In the first, we have examined oral history data of working class people born around the turn of the century in North West England, collecting together what they said about reading, writing and education and using their words to build up a composite picture of the significance of literacy in their culture (Barton 1988.) In the second, Hamilton (1987), analysed computer data from a large scale longitudinal study of a sample of the population of Britain (The National Child Development Study), focusing on reported difficulties in reading, writing and numeracy. The study provides a national overview of reading and writing problems which people encounter in their everyday lives. Its breadth provides a useful counterpoint to the detailed ethnographic approach here. One of the findings of this research was that around ten per cent of adults in Britain reported that they had some problems with reading and writing in their everyday lives.

The research in the current study has four different sources of data: detailed interviews; ethnographic case studies of individual households; observation of neighbourhood uses of literacy; and the collection of recorded data on access points for literacy. The data for this paper are mainly from the first part, interviews with twenty adults. In this paper, I want to use these data to identify aspects of literacy which are not covered by standard accounts of reading and writing and to describe what is meant by a practice account of literacy.

The adults we interviewed for this part of the study were mostly aged between twenty and thirty years. They had all been to state schools in Lancashire, England, and had left school as early as possible, at fifteen years of age in some cases, at sixteen in others, and they had left school with minimal qualifications. Most had identified some reading or writing problems as adults, and most had gone back to some form of further education as adults.

Our intention when designing the interview was that it should be like an oral history interview. There were topics we wanted to cover but we also wanted to allow for the possibility of topics arising which we had not thought of beforehand. The interview contained more than one hundred and sixty questions, several of which had sub-divisions. We did not keep rigorously to these questions during the interviews, nor to the order of topics. The aim of each interview was to encourage people to talk freely about the part literacy played in their lives. The interview schedule was used by the interviewer to make sure that the topics we were interested in were covered at some point. The questions covered things as varied as: what people do with junk mail; how long they keep cards and letters and where they keep them; where they write; when they write; if they have problems who they turn to.

Each interview lasted around two hours. Most people were interviewed twice. In the second interview we were able to pick up on information we had not covered adequately in the first interview; we also found that the interviewees had thought more about the topics in the intervening time and, having had time to mull them over or discuss them with relatives, would arrive with further information for us. They all seemed to enjoy the interview process and welcomed the opportunity to talk about themselves and to reflect on their lives with an attentive listener. No-one seemed surprised at the interest we were taking in everyday aspects of their lives.

3 Home literacy practices

In the following sections I want to outline some aspects of literacy which are often not taken account of, illustrating them with examples from our

study. There is only space here for the briefest results of our study; further details are provided in the article by Barton and Padmore (1991).

The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. Each transcript is around fifty pages of text rich in anecdotes and observations about the significance of reading and writing in these people's lives. A starting point is to list the literacy practices of this particular community of people, as any ethnographic study might, but we want to go beyond this and identify aspects of literacy that are not often studied. As a first step, we are analysing our data in terms of several themes (with the help of computer programs for the analysis of qualitative data). These themes provide a richer way of talking about literacy, and they help us identify significant aspects of the context of literacy which need to be incorporated into any theory of literacy learning. Having documented what people actually read and write and having situated literacy practices as being part of broader ***social practices***, four themes are pursued in this paper. Firstly, I examine particular ***roles*** people take and ***networks*** of support they participate in. This leads on to what ***value*** literacy holds for them. The last theme to be mentioned here, and only briefly, is the theme of how everyday ***processes*** of learning are revealed in the home. Elsewhere we intend to explore other themes such as access and power.

3.1 Literacy Practices

There are common patterns in reading and writing activities in any community, and membership in any community is partly defined by knowing and participating in these practices. In our interviews we obtained a great deal of information about what people read and write in their day-to-day lives. Here I will just give some examples, mainly of people's writing: it is a good area to document because there is a common perception that people with literacy problems do very little writing.

When we asked people questions about where and when they wrote, we found that people tended to have a regular time and place for writing and often they preferred a particular type of pen and special paper. Often they wrote in a place and at a time when they could be by themselves. Several talked of needing quiet but a few reported writing in the living room in the evening while other people were watching television.

Many people could identify a place in their home where they can always find scrap paper for messages and said that they had pens and pencils lying around the house. Each person's answer was slightly different. Often the paper was old envelopes kept in a particular drawer or scraps of paper or a memo pad kept by the telephone. In some households written messages of some sort were common and would be left in a set

place known to family members. But in other homes written messages were virtually unknown. Whether or not people left messages for each other did not appear to be an indication of the amount of other writing done in the home. Some households were held together by written messages, others were not. Several people did some regular writing, such as writing letters to friends or relatives. Even more common was keeping up contact with people by the regular sending of cards. Several people reported keeping a written list of the dates of people's birthdays and anniversaries. Sending post cards when on holiday was something which had to be done, again with a list of people to send them to.

We cannot get a feel of how common personal writing is in the larger community, but in a group of twenty people who were not particularly well educated, we were surprised at the number who do some personal writing. For example, one person kept a diary every day throughout a difficult period in his life when he was experiencing illness, unemployment and divorce; he described how writing a diary helped him make sense of changes in his life. Others reported writing poems: for instance, someone reported writing a poem for a friend going into hospital "to let her know that somebody cares." Poetry seemed to be a fairly accessible form of personal writing for several people.

These literacy practices need to be seen as part of social practices. Literacy serves other purposes. In general, people do not read in order to read, nor write in order to write; rather, people read and write in order to do other things, in order to achieve other ends. People want to know what time the train leaves or how a new watch works; they want to make sense of their lives, or keep in contact with a friend; they want to make their voice heard. They need to pay the bills or check the recipe for a cake.

Reading and writing can be part of these social activities. It fits in in different ways. It can be an integral part of the activity, or the relationship may be more complex. Reading or writing are often one option among others for achieving a given communicative goal; to find out when the train leaves there may be a choice between asking someone, phoning someone or looking in a timetable: each of these involves reading and writing in different ways. Patterns of choice may vary from one individual to another, and people trust these forms of communication in differing amounts. The importance of viewing reading and writing in terms of social practices is that we see the purpose behind the activities; we also see how intertwined the written word is with other forms of communication, especially spoken language.

3.2 Roles

If we take a closer look at these practices, where people lived in families often there were clear roles with respect to reading and writing. Usually they followed the common division of women writing in the personal sphere while men dealt with the official world. The women wrote to keep in contact with friends and relatives, while men dealt with the outside world of finance and business. These roles could be adhered to to the extent that men were unable to write a personal letter and women did not know how to write a cheque. However, this division was not a hard and fast one, and the divisions were not always obvious. Difficulties with reading and writing, or particular skills in this area, could affect the roles people took. Everyone interviewed played some part in dealing with household correspondence but in most homes letter and card writing tended to be seen as the woman's responsibility, and dealing with forms and bills the man's. Generally, even in partnerships where the woman found all aspects of literacy easier than the man, and in cases where the man could barely read or write at all, he would have a definite role to play in dealing with anything of a financial nature. Questions of power and status arise in seeing what is included in these roles.

Roles are much broader than this, and in any social event people take particular roles. The importance of talking in terms of roles is that we see that people's literacy practices are not just to do with ***abilities***, but rather they are to do with what is or is not ***appropriate***. There are appropriate roles and there are inappropriate roles. To move away from describing people's actions just in terms of abilities is a significant step in our understanding of literacy.

3.3 Networks

The roles people take in literacy practices exist within broader networks. We can map these social networks of support and the informal learning which takes place. Sometimes there was support where people identify problems with literacy related activities. Where people have problems, their roles can be very different. Another aspect of these networks is that since these networks exist, people have networks of support which help them avoid problems. Often people identify problems when these networks are removed; for example, when people move.

There are specific examples in our data of neighbourhood literacy support persons, there were examples. One woman described a relative who worked in a newsagent's shop and who was known to help customers writing greetings cards. These would be regular customers, often elderly

people. She would help them choose cards, read out the messages to them, and sometimes write the cards for them. To these customers she would be acting as a **literacy broker.** It is important to stress that this is not something only associated with people with low levels of literacy: we all do it. We all make use of particular people for support whom we can regard as brokers for literacy activities. It may be a neighbour or friend who deals with figures or fills in forms. It may be institutionalized: the railway officials who look up train times, the travel agents who fill in holiday forms for customers.

The notion of networks is important in trying to push our understanding of literacy beyond the standard accounts. One thing it emphasises is that reading and writing is not just an individual affair: often a literate activity consists of several contributing people. Identifying how literacy exists within networks is important in providing support for adults with problems of reading and writing. This approach is also needed if we are to understand the writing done in the workplace, for example, or the changing literacies of the business manager and a secretary.

3.4 Values

People's perceptions are important. A practice approach is not just claiming that there are social dimensions to literacy: rather, it claims that literacy has a social meaning. People make sense of literacy as a social phenomenon, and their social construction of literacy lies at the root of their attitudes towards it and their actions. It follows from this that people's view of literacy is important in how and what they learn.

There are a range of moral and social values attached to reading and writing. People have values, attitudes and feelings towards literacy, and these values underlie their practices and affect what they do. It is in practices that values are expressed. When people talked about reading and writing, there were two ways in which values were very prominent. Firstly, there was a moral value attached to literacy. For example, people often had strong views about reading at the meal table or writing in books. People held views about the censorship of literacy materials, what they and other people, including children, should or should not read.

The second way in which values were apparent was in the relative value attached to literacy as compared with other domains, such as practical and physical activities. Sometimes reading and writing was contrasted with work, other times it was equated with leisure. In our earlier historical study, for instance, we got the impression that people felt that it was better to be reading than to be doing nothing, but it was even better to be doing some "real" work rather than reading. (See Barton 1988 for examples.) This ties in with a common cultural belief that

physical activity is work, while sitting at a desk with a pen or a book is not.

3.5 Processes

I only want to mention this theme briefly here. It was a theme which arose in our data; we did not start out with the intention of exploring processes as this area has been well researched. In fact, reading and writing have often been seen just in terms of processes. However, processes are situated in a context and it struck us that in our data there were several examples of everyday theories of learning, where people articulated parts of the theories of learning they were operating with. One person hung lists of words around the house in order to memorize them - although reporting that it turned out to be completely ineffective. Another person wrote new words on scraps of paper, "to take them out of the jumble on the page." How people learn at home and how they think they learn at home, their awareness, forms the basis of their learning in more formal situations.

4 Children and literacy

By starting with everyday literacy practices in our research, the focus has been on adults, not on children, the usual preoccupation of studies of reading and writing. However, we can examine how all this impinges on the child and I will give brief examples here. The significance of this work for understanding how children acquire literacy is explored further in Barton (1991). It is in the home that children learn much about how to act. This is where children are inducted into literacy. Many everyday activities invoke the use of literacy in some way and children can see in practical terms what adults achieve with literacy. Sometimes, it is central and its role obvious, at other times it is not so. While some home activities are obviously to do with literacy - such as reading bedtime stories - our research underlines the importance for children's learning of other less direct activities. While it is true that households in Britain may vary a great deal in the extent to which literacy has an explicit role, all homes are touched by literacy. There is still consumer packaging to get through, bills to pay, junk mail to sort and various official forms and notices to deal with. What is delivered to the door cannot be avoided: you have to do something with it, even throwing it away involves sorting junk mail from bills and other letters.

Children participate in these social practices from an early age. Children want to know if there is any mail for them. They want to choose particular breakfast cereals and avoid other ones. They want to know from the newspaper when a particular television programme is going to

be on. In all this they can see the extent to which reading mediates the activities, how they have to go via reading to get the results they want, how they have to go via someone who reads. For some activities a child is an observer: for example, the child can observe the different roles adults take, who gets to read the newspaper first, who opens the mail; and sometimes the children may be excluded from activities: 'Leave me alone, I'm reading the paper', 'I'll be with you in a minute, I've got some bills to pay'. Children observe these roles, such as the gender roles, in the people around them. More importantly, children participate in these activities: they take roles themselves and become part of networks. They are incorporated into the shopping or opening the mail in the mornings and from an early stage become participants in social practices. The aim of these activities is not to teach children literacy, and with many of them the activities are not particularly for the child. They may be for the benefit of adults and have no obvious relevance to the child. Nevertheless, as with other family activities the children are brought into these activities and learn from them.

It is a commonplace observation that parental attitudes and actions influence a child's behaviour at school: it is necessary to clarify how these values form part of theories of how children learn to read and write. Children are being inducted into a world where values towards literacy form part of the fabric of everyday life. On aspect of this which struck us in our data was change from generation to generation, as people pass on a culture in a rapidly changing environment. There were examples of the ways in which the people we interviewed wanted life to be different for their children. Several people articulated this strongly. One woman who left school with no qualifications was drawn into education while bringing up her children. She made a great effort to get her children to read, choosing books for them and helping them with their homework. She saw it as "the only way out of the poverty trap for the children".

5 Conclusion

I began by saying that there were two approaches to the study of literacy, those which treat it as a measurable set of skills and those which treat it as a social practice; and I have started to sketch out what is involved in a practice view by reporting part of a study we are conducting at Lancaster. The first approach to literacy is the more established one and provides the standard framework for much research, including most of that on the relation of literacy and thought. People who are dissatisfied with this approach have been looking around for alternatives. I hope that I have identified some aspects of literacy which are not usually addressed but which are essential for a full understanding of how people learn to read and write and of the relationship between literacy and thought.

One change suggested by a practice view of literacy is a shift away from the idea of there being a set of abilities which can be measured in a way which reflects what people can do: it is apparent that people's abilities are overlaid by their perceptions of the value of literacy and by notions of what is or is not appropriate behaviour. Another example, described above, is the extent to which literacy - and thought - are not individual skills residing in people's heads, but are collaborative activities involving networks of people taking particular roles. These brief examples provide the beginnings of new ways of talking about literacy. We need to move away from talking of literacy as a unified "thing" and of learning as being a set of fixed skills which are acquired. We need to accept that literacy is embedded in particular contexts and that it varies from one domain to another and from one event to another, so that school literacy, for example, is seen as being one of several ***literacies.*** The focus moves from a static model of an individual with a set of skills to a more dynamic notion of social practices which people participate in. Any theory of learning also needs to incorporate people's perceptions - their awareness of and attitudes to what they are learning and how they learn.

To return to the beginning of this paper, I suggested two possibilities: either, as one contemporary review suggests, we have two incompatible approaches - two distinct paradigms - or, as another review suggests, we have two distinct strands of research which need to be united. At the conceptual level I believe we have two distinct paradigms, that new and distinct ways of talking about literacy and literacy problems are necessary. On the other hand, at the practical level, ways need to be found to incorporate these new views into educational practice and into public debate about problems of reading and writing.

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-- Notes --

1. Alongside a practice view of the nature of literacy, views of thought are also developing to take account of approaches where thought processes are seen as being embedded in the social context. In this paper I am concentrating on the notion of literacy, deconstructing and rebuilding it. The same needs to be done for thought: thought processes are embedded in a context, thought is action. I cannot pursue this here, but see, for example, Lave 1988; Rogoff and Lave 1984. Taken together, literacy and thought cease to be straightforward dimensions and we are not looking for measurable "influences", "consequences" or "effects". Rather, we are looking for new ways of talking about literacy and about thought.